

Consciousness (3 of 5) Conscious of Pleasure

October 5, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awareness, psychological, biological, attention, pain, brain

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I am repeating what I have said in the first few days. I understand consciousness or awareness (I use the words more or less synonymously) in the sense that it is a thing. We have this thing called consciousness, whatever that might be. It is something that is always here, maybe something that has a united or whole feeling.

To the degree to which consciousness is a thing, it is a gestalt. It is a combination of many different biological, physiological, mental, and cognitive faculties working together as a whole, without necessarily our choice or direction for how it is done. The holistic workings of all this can make it feel like there is such a thing as consciousness.

Some people have the idea that when everything else disappears, consciousness will remain – a kind of pristine consciousness. I do not think that this is an idea of early Buddhism.

What we call consciousness, the idea we have of it, is the sum total of all the different attentional faculties and cognitive functionings we have. This is a very rich idea and is conducive to putting greater value on our capacity to be aware, to be attentive. The whole attentional system works better when it is all known or there is space for it all to be here. If we are caught up in preoccupations, we limit how much space there is in the mind. We limit how much free RAM there is in the mind for the processing and working of all the other things that can be going on. Sometimes we reach the limit of how much our active memory can handle, and we get stressed. The psychological-biological system begins breaking down.

Something as simple as being so busy with work and activities can cause one to forget to drink. Even though the body has signals that will tell you that you are thirsty, they are overridden by the intensity of focus on something. That is true with many things in our lives. If we are too focused or too preoccupied, we are not going to avail ourselves or notice and allow all the rich systems of attention, data gathering, and processing that exist within us to function.

One of those systems is the capacity to feel pleasure and pain. These are very important parts of life. Without this, our life would not really work. People who don't feel pain can damage themselves because they don't get the signal to pull their hand off a hot stove, for example, or stop cutting into their fingers when they are actually trying to cut bread or vegetables. There are a few people in the world who apparently cannot feel pain. I imagine there are also people who cannot feel pleasure.

That is unfortunate just for pleasure's sake, but pleasure is also the vehicle in which other information comes to us and other systems within us begin operating. In Buddhism, there is a strong emphasis on being present and mindful for the pleasant and pleasure of our experience. It is very valuable to tune into pleasure and develop equanimity towards it. It is also valuable because if we have equanimity and allow pleasure and pain to be there, we might start to appreciate that it is not just mechanistic pleasure and pain. It is part of a bigger system of human functioning going on behind that mechanistic pleasure or pain.

Consider something as simple as human touch – human touch can feel pleasant. It's nice that it's pleasant. But there can be so much happening physiologically and psychologically with physical touch. If it is pleasant, it can be reassuring. It can be nurturing to touch a child or hold a baby. Human touch is necessary for the system of a premature baby to be able to mature.

Touch supports the growth and development of children. Touch is valuable for our sense of safety, a sense of social connection, and a sense of inner nourishment. The pleasure of social touch is fantastic.

There is the pleasure of sexual touch. That can also be wonderful, but it has a very different mechanism. Other things are going on and involved there, too. In sexual touch, the pleasure there is so clearly connected to much more than just the place that is being touched. It is part of a bigger system – hormones and all kinds of things are going on.

Where does aesthetic pleasure come from? What are all the systems that are operating when we see something really beautiful in nature or beautiful art? The sense of satisfaction and inspiration we might feel can be very pleasant. That pleasure is more than just some simple pleasure. There are probably all kinds of processes within us that have been activated.

Apparently, there are many pleasure centers in the brain. So pleasure is not just physical pleasure or the sensations sensing themselves as being pleasant. It is a process in the brain. To allow ourselves these simple pleasures – and not deny them – can be very helpful for this integrated, full awareness that we are trying to develop in mindfulness. As that develops, our capacity to be with pain also develops.

We are not holding onto pleasure or expecting it to be there all the time, but we are learning a nonreactive way of being with all things. Pain too is an important system for us. I have learned through mindfulness practice to pay careful attention to pain when it arises. One of the functions of pain is that it can be a danger signal.

As I pay attention, I can sometimes feel a signal of danger in the pain itself. I can't specify how that is or how I know, but sometimes it is just clear there is a danger. Something is about to go wrong or badly. Other times the pain feels okay: "This pain is okay. I may have injured myself. The injury is over, and now it's healing. Now there is pain that is just there. It is left over and needs to be there until the injury settles down. I don't feel danger anymore."

If I feel a sense of danger, I don't just practice mindfulness and acceptance of it. I will try to avoid the danger if it is possible. If I am sitting in meditation and I feel a sense of danger about how I am sitting, I'll change my posture. If I don't feel that sense of danger, then I don't.

This pain is also connected to all kinds of deeper systems that are providing information. Tuning into this world of pleasure and pain can feed back onto what we might call consciousness or our sense of awareness. The sense of awareness and consciousness can take a different shape depending on the feedback. I don't know if "shape" is the right word. These are all metaphors for something that doesn't really exist, but we have a kind of intuitive sense of it. The consciousness or awareness can feel contracted or expansive.

Consciousness or awareness can feel tense if there is a lot of pain. It can feel the pleasure and goodness in it as it expands. Some people feel that consciousness in and of itself has bliss as part of it. I don't think it is in and of itself, but as things get simpler and quieter, the awareness can tune into these other systems that are working in harmony. The sense of harmony creates pleasure for the awareness itself.

There are many pleasures – the pleasures of sleep, eating, drinking, sex, exercise. All these can provide pleasure – not just a physiological surface pleasure of the moment – but they tap into something deeper within. They may tap into a sense of satisfaction and inspiration.

So pleasure and pain are pieces of this gestalt, this whole that contributes to our sense of being conscious.

I'd like to suggest for the next 24 hours that you give a kind of respectful attention, maybe even reverential attention, to the simple pleasures and pain of daily life with the assumption that they are not so simple. They are like the tip of a vast inner, interpersonal network that is somehow being conveyed, carried, or evoked by pleasure and pain. Offering respect to that means making room and feeling what is going on in some bigger way. Allow yourself to feel that pleasure. Allow yourself to feel the pain. You don't feel pain or pleasure for itself, but to see if it helps you connect to some deeper or fuller dimensions of how your system and body-mind work.

So thank you very much. I look forward to continuing with this theme of our attentional faculties tomorrow.